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ABSTRACT

The impact of children's reactions to punishment on subsequent adult disciplinary actions was assessed in a study in which adult women administered rewards and punishments contingent on the behavior of a child viewed on a television monitor. Following an aggressive act by the target child and punishment administered by the adult subject, the adult saw the child react to being disciplined in one of four ways (plead, reparation, ignore or defiance). The adult subjects were given a subsequent opportunity to reward or punish the child again by offering or taking away points that the child could ostensibly trade for free play time. The child who reacted to adult discipline by being defiant or by ignoring the agent was most harshly dealt with by the adult subjects. The child who pleaded for lighter punishment was less severely treated, and the child who reacted to punishment by apologizing and promising to behave was generally rewarded by the adult subjects. These findings are discussed in terms of a bidirectional model of childhood socialization wherein recognition is given to the active role the child plays in controlling the disciplinary practices of socializing agents. (Author/JMB)

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The Child's Role in Sparing the Rod[1]

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Research and theories of childhood socialization have traditionally been based on a unidirectional model of effects: the modeling and reinforcing activities of socializing agents serve to shape the behaviors of children. More recently, Parke (1970, 1974) has argued that a model which treats the child as a passive recipient of adult-controlled input is inadequate. He emphasized the need for interactive approaches in which a bidirectional model of socialization is utilized to assure that the child receives proper recognition as an active participant. Specifically, he proposed research of the role the child plays in modifying adult behavior in disciplinary contexts.

Several investigators have found that adult disciplinary practices vary with characteristics of the child. Clifford (1959) reports that children's age is associated with shifts of maternal discipline from manual or physical techniques to those which are more verbal in nature. Children's sex is a modifier of adult disciplinary behavior. Adults advocate less punishment for females than for males who commit the same severe offence (Dion, 1972), and fathers are more lenient with daughters and mothers less punitive with their sons (Rothbart & Maccoby, 1966). Coates (1972) reports that children's race influences adult punitiveness. Adult males gave more negative responses to black children in a learning situation than to white children. In a similar study, Dion (1974) found that adult women were less punitive toward an attractive boy than toward either an attractive girl or an unattractive boy. Considered together, these reports provide strong support for the argument that children's characteristics play an important role in the determination of adult disciplinary practices.

Research in this area has dealt primarily with physical characteristics of the children to the exclusion of more active or manipulative behavioral determinants. Persuasive evidence that behavioral as well as physical characteristics play a role in determining adult disciplinary practices comes from studies of excessive use of physical punishment (e.g., child battering) in which it has be

found that the same child received very similar batterings in two different homes (Milowe & Lourie, 1964). Certain child behaviors may, in part, be responsible for eliciting extreme treatment from adults. What is needed now are analyses of children's role in modifying adult behaviors in disciplinary contexts in which attempts are made to specify the kinds of responses that are effective elicitors and modifiers of adult punitiveness.

In the study to be reported here we explored one aspect of this problem, namely, the manner in which adult socializing agents' disciplinary activities are modified by children's reactions to being disciplined. As a first step in understanding this process, Parke, Sebastian, Collmer & Sawin (1974) employed a social perception approach in order to determine whether adults and children can systematically predict adult behavior in a video-taped disciplinary encounter with a misbehaving child. Both adults and children were asked to judge how an adult disciplinarian would respond to different reactions (e.g. defiance, reparation) following a punitive episode. Each subject was shown a single two-minute videotape in which a child misbehaves (deliberately knocks a book off a peer's desk) and a female teacher verbally reprimands the misbehaving child ("That was bad, you shouldn't have done that; now you won't be allowed to go out for recess"). The reaction of the deviant child was one of the following: (1) Reparation--The child offers to pick up the book; (2) Plead--The child protests the punishment (3) Ignore (no reaction)--The child turns away from the teacher and says nothing; (4) Defiance--The child angrily tells the teacher that he doesn't care what she does because he doesn't like recess anyway.

The results from this earlier social perception phase indicate that children have well defined notions of the way in which adult socializing agents will respond to different kinds of child reactions to being disciplined. Children and adults who viewed the punished child engage in reparative action after being

disciplined were more likely to predict that the teacher would respond positively. Pleading was more often predicted to elicit a consoling reaction, and a defiant reaction by the punished child produced predictions of both anger and threat on the part of the punishing agent.

Although the situations that were employed in the social perception studies were closely patterned after real-life situations, there are clear limitations to this type of research. While these studies indicate how children expect adults to respond, it is necessary to determine by means of laboratory analogue experiments whether adult socializing agents actually do respond to child reactions to discipline in the ways our social perception investigations suggest. Thus the study to be reported here was designed to provide an experimental analysis of the impact of children's various reactions to punishment on subsequent adult disciplinary actions by placing adults in a situation in which they are asked to administer rewards and punishments contingent on the actual behavior of children and in which we measured increases and decreases in adult punitiveness as a function of children's reactions to being disciplined were measured.

Forty adult females were recruited through a newspaper advertisement and a nearby university. The subjects were brought to the Fels Institute for their participation in the study and each participated individually. In brief, subjects were taken to a laboratory room and shown a video tape of two children in a school-like context. Subjects were asked to assist in assessing how adults and children can interact by means of a remote closed circuit television monitoring and control system that might be used in understaffed day care facilities to supplement regular person to person contacts. They were asked to monitor the behavior of two seven year old boys in a school-like situation and to interact with them by means of the remote system.

In addition to a television monitor for observing the children's behavior, the subjects were provided with a feedback apparatus that was labeled the Teacher

Assistant System and which consisted of a cue light and a series of ten response buttons numbered from minus five to plus five. The cue light signaled the subject when to respond to the child's behavior by pushing the buttons to add or subtract points from the child's accumulated total. The subjects were informed that the children would subsequently be permitted to trade their points for varying amounts of free play time. In fact, however, the response panel was connected to a panel of lights in the adjoining experimenter's room where the subject's responses were recorded.

Once left alone, the subjects were shown one of four video tapes which were similar except for a short sequence near the end which was varied by experimental condition. The tapes showed a female adult bringing two young boys into the classroom and asking them to work quietly on independent workbook projects until she returned. She reminds one of the children that a second adult (the subject) is monitoring his behavior and will offer him continuous feedback in the form of "free play" points on a regular schedule via the "point box" on his desk. Following five baseline trials during which the children become increasingly restless, the target child reaches over and pushes the second child's workbook off the table. Immediately following the misbehavior the subjects were cued to respond for the sixth time. This served as the initial punishment. Immediately following this teacher discipline, the manipulation was instituted by having the teacher subjects view one of four sequences of tape which showed the target child responding to the subtracted points in one of the following ways: (1) Reparation: After viewing the point box, the child runs and retrieves the book and returns it to child B and says, "I'm sorry. I'll sit in my chair and be good." (2) Plead: After viewing the point box, the child looks very upset and says, "That wasn't so bad, please don't take points away from me, please." (3) Ignore: After viewing the point box, the child folds his arms and turns his

back on the camera. (4) Defy: After viewing the point box, the child looks merrily at the camera and says, "Go ahead and take away those stupid points. I don't care."

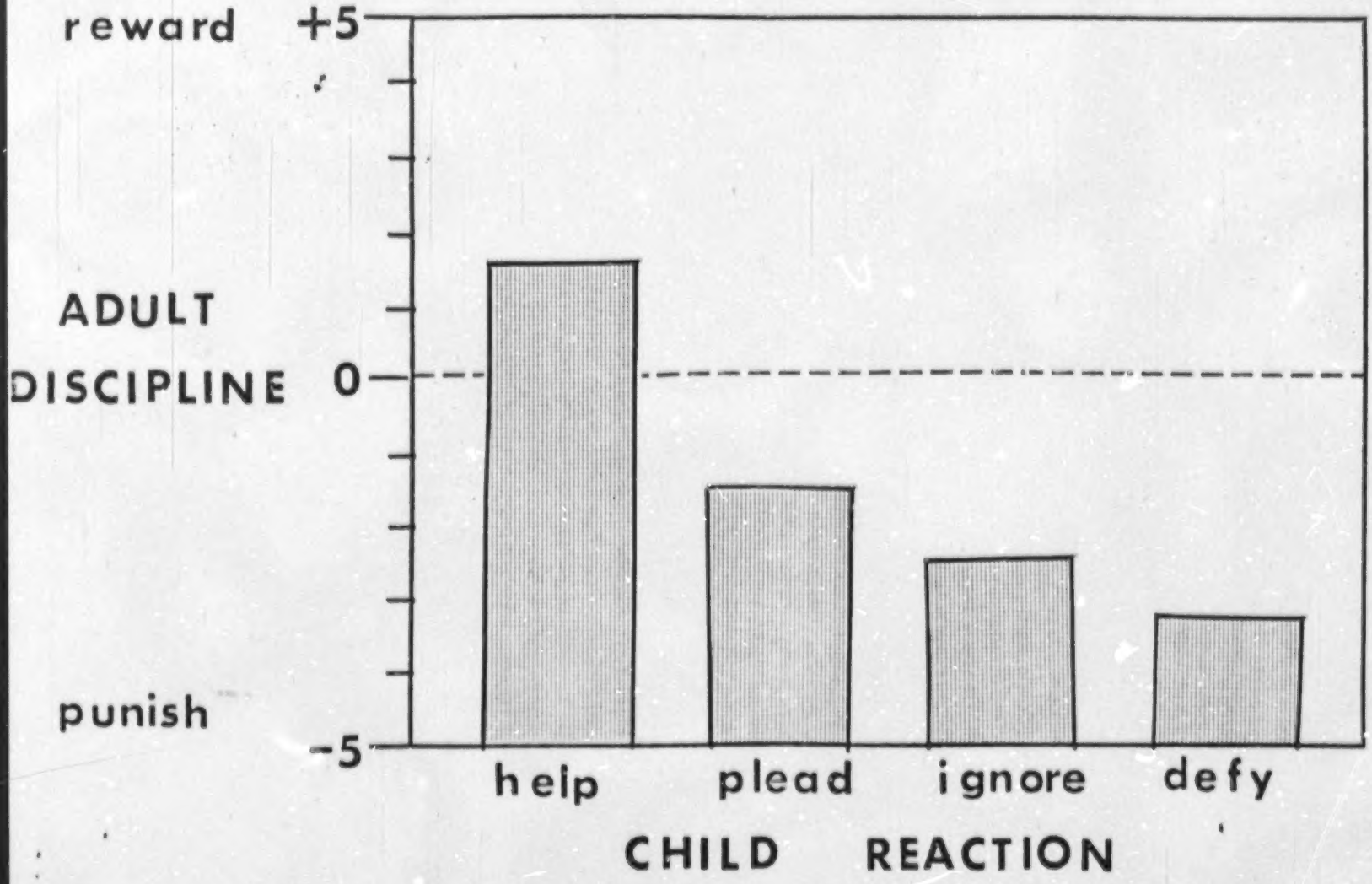
Immediately following the target child's reaction to being punished, the adult subject was cued to respond again; this was the crucial test trial since it followed immediately on the child's reaction to the prior discipline. For another five trials the tapes were identical again and the procedure described above was repeated for a second time. Following the second series of trials, the experimenter returned to the subject's room, turned off the monitor and discussed the actual nature of the study with the subject.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the findings parallel those we have obtained in the studies based on adult and child predictions of the effects child reactions to discipline have on subsequent adult disciplinary behavior: on both test trials 1 and 2, the child who reacted to the punishment by being defiant or by ignoring the socializing agent was most harshly dealt with by the adult subjects. The child who responded to the teacher's discipline by pleading for a lighter punishment was not disciplined so severely on the subsequent test trial, and, most interestingly, the child who reacted to punishment by apologizing and promising to behave properly (reparation) was not punished at all on the next trial (test trial) but, in fact, was rewarded for his behavior by the adult subjects adding points to his total.

The implications of these findings are clear: in contexts where socializing agents are continuously monitoring children's behavior and are administering rewards and punishments, the reactions of the children to the disciplinary behavior of the agent have predictable and consistent influences on the agents' subsequent disciplinary actions. Children's reactions to discipline serve as determinants of how severely they will be dealt with on future occasions. Not only do

children's reactions serve to modify adult disciplinary behavior, but they may serve to maintain adult punitiveness. Finally, these findings provide additional support for a bidirectional model of adult-child interaction in which the role of the child in controlling adult behavior is recognized.

ADULT DISCIPLINE IN RESPONSE TO CHILDREN'S REACTIONS TO PRIOR PUNISHMENT



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Notes

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